

Per Seyersted, *From Norwegian Romantic to American Realist: Studies in the Life and Writings of Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen*. Oslo: Solum Forlag; Atlantic Highlands, N.J.: Humanities Press, 1984. 192 pp.

In 1963, when the Norwegian-American Historical Association introduced its Authors Series with Clarence A. Glasrud's biography of Hjalmar Hjorth Boyesen, it felt a need to justify its choice: Boyesen, although Norwegian-born, had had little to do with his fellow countrymen in the New World. From the time he arrived there in 1869, at twenty years of age, he strove hard to become an American: he wrote all of his twenty-odd books in English, married an American girl, and lived his entire adult life in the United States. Yet, the editors stated, it was really Boyesen's Norwegian background which accounted for his popularity during his lifetime. When he started out as a writer, it was with a romantic idyll, *Gunnar: A Tale of Norse Life* — serialized in the *Atlantic Monthly* in 1873 — and the material that he used there, as well as his treatment of it, established an ideal that reviewers and the reading public alike harked back to throughout his subsequent career.

For Boyesen did not remain a romantic, and the position, albeit marginal, that he occupies in American literature is closely linked with the trend towards realism in the last few decades of the nineteenth century. This is so on two counts. First, although he was restrained by his awareness of the demands of a genteel public — and the need to support a socialite wife in style — Boyesen fought a proclivity to romance in his own fiction, and in his last novels, particularly *The Mammon of Unrighteousness* (1891), he took great strides towards realism. Second, and here lies his chief importance perhaps, he worked indefatigably for the cause of realism generally; as a college professor, as a popular lecturer, and as a magazinist of the first rank, he helped introduce and defend European writers, especially Scandinavian ones, to an American audience and so made his new countrymen more familiar with European culture.

Glasrud felt that Boyesen had been undeservedly neglected, and his biography represented an attempt to remedy the situation. Other scholars followed, like Per Seyersted, who, partly in reaction to Glasrud's findings, published a number of articles on Boyesen and his contemporaries, and, most recently, Robert S. Frederikson, who, in 1980, brought out a volume on Boyesen in the Twayne series. In order to make his work available to a wider audience, Prof. Seyersted has now collected — and in two instances translated — five articles that were first published in Scandinavian periodicals between 1964 and 1971: he complains that even Boyesen specialists seem unaware of his writings and of the previously untapped Norwegian material on which they are based. Here, then, we get a picture of Boyesen and his

development that is a complement to and in some instances a correction of that given by Glasrud and others.

After a foreword by Boyesen scholar Marc L. Ratner, the volume opens with an essay on the relations between Bjørnstjerne Bjørnson and Boyesen. Through letters, mainly, Seyersted traces fluctuations in their friendship and shows the tremendous importance of Bjørnson as a model for the younger man. Emulating him, and encouraged by him, Boyesen saw himself as a Norwegian-American skald — a poet, prophet, and warrior — and when he felt later that he had fallen in Bjørnson's esteem, this affected him deeply, as Seyersted makes clear.

The next two articles are more tangential to Boyesen scholarship. One focuses on Alexander Kielland and two disparate topics: where that writer stood vis-à-vis Daudet and Zola, and how he came to consider leaving Europe for America. Seyersted examines these issues through Kielland's correspondence with Boyesen, among others, but since all of Boyesen's replies have been lost, including a letter where he must have spoken forcefully against Kielland's idea about emigrating, little comes to light concerning Boyesen's views that is not reflected elsewhere in his writings. The other deals with Turgenyev's interest in America as it is revealed in his contacts with Boyesen, Howells, and others, and again little is added to our picture of Boyesen.

Then follow what must be considered the two major essays in the book. In "Outer Success, Inner Failure," Seyersted explores Boyesen's vision of himself as a poet and the role Bjørnson played as a model and a touchstone for his work. There is necessarily some overlap between this piece and the first one, particularly, in the collection, as there will be when separate articles are brought together with only minor revisions. Seyersted then goes on to show how Boyesen, through his awareness of the gulf between his ambition and actual achievement, gradually came to see America and the Americans as blocking his road to greatness. A lawsuit in 1885 brought home to him his immigrant status and marked a turning point in his life, as did a visit to Norway six years later; together, as Seyersted establishes, these events forced him to realize that he had lost not only his Norwegian roots, but even his identity, and made him feel a failure in spite of his outer success.

"The Drooping Lily," finally considers Boyesen's early idealization of the opposite sex and traces his later misgivings in that area to a realization that he was being exploited by his wife. Through a reading of *The Mammon of Unrighteousness* Seyersted explores the degree to which Boyesen can be looked upon as a misogynist and explains the "double attitude" towards women that is evident in his various writings.

All in all, the picture of Boyesen's views that emerges from these essays is a rather full one; an appendix, where eight late articles of Boyesen's are reprinted, then helps substantiate some of Seyersted's contentions. Here we meet with discussions of some of Boyesen's favorite subjects: the American novelist and his public, romanticism versus realism, the American woman, and emigration are among them. The volume is concluded with a bibliography supplementary to that found in Glasrud's study.